

The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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THE ESSAY---SUBSTANCE AND FORM

FOR some time I have planned to say something on article-writing. The main hindrance has been that the writing of articles cannot be reduced to rules and formulas. The hackneyed advice, "Have something to say, and then say it," very fully covers the ground. In fiction-writing there is a definite technique. A short-story must have a plot, a climax, an orderly progression of incidents. Each of these is subject to definition, analysis, and classification. Not that the best fiction is manufactured according to rule; for, indeed, fiction-writers frequently are handicapped by too much knowledge of technique. But it can hardly be successfully denied that the short-story does conform to what may be termed a pattern—just as all human beings conform to a certain type, each having the same general arrangement of limbs, organs, features, and so forth; though all sorts of variations are possible in size, color, expression, strength, beauty, and other details of individuality.

It is doubtful whether an article, say of the essay type, is reducible to any such definite pattern. So many are the varieties under this head that each essay may be termed its own pattern. We have likened the short-story to human beings in respect of the variations in the pattern. Retaining this comparison, we may consider the essay as corresponding to all the other objects in the universe, from the nebulous to the concrete, from the boundless to the infinitesimal.

It may be like a sunset cloud, formless, intangible, elusive, and touched by changing tints of thought. It may be like a chair, rigid, useful, obvious, and upholstered with serviceable facts. It may be like a river, liquid, winding, smoothly flowing toward some mighty objective. It may be like a volley of musketry, staccato, deadly, a shattering array of dynamic arguments. It may be like a machine, complex, cunningly designed, and smoothly running. It may be like a flower, idyllic, full of the perfume of delicate sentiment, but often fragile and perishable. It may be the expression of a mood,

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the objectification of a scientific thought, or the plea of a reformer. It may be—whatever it is.

How, then, may one presume to instruct others to write essays? The form is largely dependent upon the content, and to tell a student that a certain form must be followed is equivalent to saying that he must think certain thoughts.

The rhetoric books would have us believe that a composition of the essay type must be constructed along certain formal lines—that such and such a place is for the statement of the subject, such and such a place for development of the theme, such and such a place for the recapitulation—and so on.

Such a formal outline may be very well when strictly confined to the class-room. It is well that students should learn to arrange their thoughts in some sort of order, and the prescribed arrangement is probably as good as any—simply as drill. But when the writer has something to say, he will do well to forget the theoretical construction he has learned in school and allow the form and arrangement of his composition to be determined by his message. The principle holds both here and in Nature—

*For of the soul the body form doth take;
For soul is form, and doth the body make.*

A letter—such as you may write to an intimate friend—should be the model for an essay. Therein you are concerned only with expressing certain ideas. Suppose that your letters were all constructed according to prescribed formulas—how easy to imagine the editor of some accepted school rhetoric solemnly laying before you some such outline as this:

I. Introduction:

- (a) Excuse for not having written sooner (company and other distractions)—100 words.
- (b) Comment on the weather—50 words.

II. Preparation for body of letter:

Answer to questions in correspondent's last letter—200 words.

III. Body of letter:

- (a) Comment on the war—50 words.
- (b) Comment on high cost of living—300 words.
- (c) Description of recent fishing trip, or of new gown just completed, with sample attached (according to sex)—200 words.

IV. Preparation for close:

Questions about correspondent and correspondent's family—100 words.

V. Close:

- (a) Apology for having nothing to say—50 words.

(b) Hope that correspondent will write soon—20 words.

(c) Postscript—ad lib.—50 words.

Just think how overjoyed your friend would be to receive such carefully planned letters every month. How many of them do you suppose would be read through?

Seriously, anyone interested in receiving a letter from you wants a spontaneous expression of thought, and to him, whether conscious of it or not, any formality of expression or arrangement in your correspondence is evidence of weakness—proof that you had no thought to express.

Even in the world of practical affairs this holds true. The business man who receives a stilted, formal letter knows that the writer of it was frozen with fear that he would make a "break" of some kind. Advertising men are paid large fees by business firms to write for them letters that shall be informal, direct, and free from stilted phraseology.

If a conventional form-letter lacks interest to your friend, how much less interesting will be a conventional form-essay, addressed to the public, which has no personal interest in you to induce it to read what you have written. Just as the most interesting letter is one marked by spontaneous expression of thought, so is an interesting essay one that has been similarly evoked. To try to fit that thought into an academic pattern is like pouring cement into jelly molds. For a result, you will have something that looks like jelly but isn't jelly; when, properly treated, it would have made a good doorstep. The nature of the material should determine the form.

This must not be interpreted, however, as meaning that any idea, expressed in any old way, will result in a good essay. On the contrary, it is often difficult to attain the particular form through which the idea may be best expressed. In order to reach its audience, a serious subject may, perhaps, need a certain admixture of humor. A whimsical style usually serves to maintain interest in "heavy" facts that would otherwise bore the average reader. Of course, one of the most successful and commonly used devices for making dry facts entertaining is that of interpolating a number of little stories and illustrative incidents.

If an essay is intended for anything like general reading, it is almost impossible to overdo the number of illustrations. I have noticed that in these Student-Writer discussions the articles in which were used a number of illustrative examples were those that seemed to make the deepest impression upon readers. An illustration at once reduces the thought to concrete form—to something that readers can visualize for themselves.

Occasionally the method of illustration may be so extended that the essay takes on the form of a little story. In other words, the

illustrations are merged in one big illustration. "The Story of a Thousand-Year Pine," by Enos A. Mills, is an example. Fundamentally, it is an essay on natural history; but it is made unusually appealing because the author illustrates his facts by uncovering, bit by bit, the history of a certain tree. An essay on the value of thrift, or some other principle of conduct, may be illustrated by the story of a man who exemplified it in his life. Such an illustration may be so expanded as to dominate the piece, and the dividing line between the essay and the short-story then becomes so nebulous as to be merely a matter of individual definition. Many business stories that appear in *The Saturday Evening Post* and some other magazines, are simply essays in which the illustration thus dominates.

The essay-writer, then, has need to remember but few rules. His thought should be shaped into the form that seems best to express it, while clearness of style and frequent illustrations are aids that he cannot afford to scorn. For the rest, his success depends altogether upon originality of thought. And that is something that must be inborn.

By far the larger part of the essays and articles that editors are compelled to reject—and a goodly proportion even of those which they accept—are entirely lacking in originality. They are restatements of someone else's thought. Original thinking is the rarest thing in the world. Emerson warns us to beware when God lets loose a thinker on this planet. Though perhaps our chief danger lies in not being prepared to recognize him when we see him.

But it is probable that strictly original thought does not exist. For practical purposes only, we might define an original thought as one that is new to most of the people living in a certain era. Under this definition, we could admit Sir Isaac Newton's revolutionary contributions to science. Herbert Spencer, Darwin, and others among the philosophers, no doubt, made some actual contributions to the stock of ideas in the world, as did also a few of the great poets, the great religious teachers, and the great in other lines. If there is in the world today one mind of such caliber as this we may count our generation fortunate.

The true origination of thought is inconceivably difficult. If it exists at all, it proves the possibility of miracles. It is much the same as taking a pot of sterile earth, from it creating a seed, and causing a new variety of fruit to grow. The easier method of evolving something new—the method which any one of normal powers must employ—is to make two existing fruits, cross them, and thereby produce a new fruit. Which is altogether a different matter from *creating* a fruit.

The difference between mentality of ordinarily good grade and the mentality capable of actually originating thought is simply be-

yond estimate. It is well for the presuming writer to consider this fact and to learn humility therefrom.

But at least we may hope to attain some measure of second-rate originality. Even the putting together of thoughts in new combinations is difficult enough—and the man who can thus combine principles will pass for original, whether in the realm of invention, business, art, or letters. The men who attached a very light and powerful engine to a kitelike glider, and thus formed a flying machine, did not actually produce anything new, but they evolved a new and effective combination, which amounted to virtual origination.

For the writer there is wide opportunity for just such originality; that of effecting new combinations of old ideas. One great trouble is that most who try to write cannot realize that the field of thought has been pretty well plowed up. Editors are constantly in receipt of ponderous essays on hackneyed subjects. Here will be an article on "The Evils of Drink." No chance for it. Why? Because almost everybody already knows the evils of drink. Yet Booth Tarkington "got past" the editors of *The American Magazine* not long ago with a temperance essay. Again why? Because he suggested a new and yet convincing method of overcoming the drink habit. It wasn't strikingly ingenious at that—just enough so to rise above the hackneyed level.

Before submitting your essay or article to an editor, question yourself severely about the source from which it came. Is it merely a compilation of the thoughts you have gleaned from other writers, or does it contain some basic fact that you yourself have discovered from personal thought and investigation? Then again, are you sure that you have read enough of what other writers have had to say on the same subject to be sure that the idea does not appear and reappear in their work? You may discover for yourself that spraying your apple trees with cologne improves the flavor of the fruit; but don't be eager to rush into print on the subject. Make reasonably sure that the fact has hitherto been overlooked in standard horticultural textbooks. Most subjects have been very much written upon.

True, it is almost impossible to write on any subject without consciously or unconsciously drawing upon other writers for material. But at least be sure that the basic ideas are comparatively novel. Almost all text-books are compilations of staid-and-safe lore; hence they should be shunned as models by writers anxious to achieve originality. When an editor says that an article has too much of the textbook quality, he means that it contains too many facts that are generally known—all of them seemingly taken at secondhand from other authorities. If he says that an essay is lifeless, he means much the same thing. For the life of a literary

composition is the new, first-hand thought that it contains.

These general principles will, I think, fit almost any form of article that may be written. The principle is the same whether applied to a simple household "discovery," an agricultural article, a speech, a tract, a scientific treatise, an inspirational essay, a sermon, a business dissertation, or a plea for national defense. Unless the writer has something to say that he has good reason to believe will make an impression of newness upon his audience, he had better hold his peace. Even when the truths are such as will bear repeating, they lose their force unless the repetition is made from some new and illuminating point of view.

As for the form—let that be decided by the nature of the material. One other point, in this connection, might be mentioned. Many essayists feel that a certain amount of allusion and quotation from other writers is needed to embellish their work and give it the backing of authority. The modern tendency appears to be toward a sparing use of quotation. Personally, I feel that this is preferable—for when I read an article by a certain writer, I want to read what he himself has to say—not a compilation of what others may have said on the same subject. An undue amount of quotation gives the impression that the writer distrusts his own opinions, or perhaps has none. But then, again, it all depends on the writer, the subject, and the purpose in view. For the essay is really a "go-as-you-please" form of composition.

—W. E. H.

WRITE THE FIRST PAGE LAST

By CHAUNCEY THOMAS

THIS is just a postscript to "Mechanical Principles of Creative Writing," the leading article in the May issue of *The Student-Writer*.

Mr. Hawkins gives as good a method as I know by which to resume writing when one must stop at intervals. But here is a little trick I often use myself, and which I have given to others, that starts one off at the very beginning when one actually has nothing to say. For instance, Mr. Anderson, the foreman of *Outdoor Life*, is howling his head off for copy. He has just telephoned for the third time, and is holding the forms for a "Campfire Talk." I simply must get it in today—and my mind is a blank. Well?

I sit down to the machine and write a personal letter to some friend of mine. Just a common personal letter, but after a page or two somehow I get going on a subject that will do for a "Campfire." Do I stop right there and begin a "Campfire?" I do not. I just keep right on hammering out that personal letter. When it is done I calmly cut it in two, write a page or so of introduction to the tail end and shoot it down to Anderson for a "Campfire Talk," then tack on a few lines to the first part to complete the personal letter—and I have killed two birds with one stone.

"How shall I begin?" is a question often asked. "Tear up the first page," is my usual answer. Remember, every word in the copy need

not come out in print. If your mental muscles are sore or stiff, begin by stumbling along about any old subject till you get limbered up, then keep right on going—but fork to another trail. When you have said enough, cut out the warming-up pages, and “write the first page last.” (This was O’Henry’s method, I have been told.) After the story is written, then write the first page (last) to fit the story.

COMMENTS

The article on “Web-Work Plot Structure,” published complete, with diagrams, in the three issues of *The Student-Writer*, June, July, and August, has aroused wider interest than any other subject yet taken up for discussion. Space permits the publication of only a few of the letters received.

J. Frank Davis, popular serial and short story writer, writes: “Please send extra copies of the current numbers of *The Student-Writer* to my summer address. I do not want to miss any numbers—especially the continued article on Mr. Keeler’s plot methods.”

O. Byron Copper, editor Department of Newspaper Criticism, *The National Printer-Journalist*, writes: “I have just received and read your excellent book, ‘Helps for Student-Writers,’ and I cannot resist the sense of duty which impels me to write you this feeble attempt at expressing my appreciation of the work.”

“Of all the matter of the kind which I have been able to get hold of, ‘Helps for Student-Writers’ is by far the best, and I shall never cease to feel grateful to Editor Harry Stephen Keeler of the 10 Story Book for having put me in touch with it.”

“Your little magazine reached me all right, and I have certainly enjoyed the series on ‘Web-Work Plot’ now running. I can see that I have got more’n my money’s worth already.”

Harry Stephen Keeler, whose story was used as the basis of the “Web-Work” article, almost made the editor blush by writing as follows: “The article is bully, absolutely so. It is a masterly analysis. I would rather have had you make the analysis than anyone else in the country, because you are one of the few technicians who have worked ‘back of the scenes’ yourself; who have constructed as well as taught ‘how to construct.’ The article will be devoured by literary students, I’m sure. I appreciate the painstaking work you have put on the story, in mapping out the incidents and tracing out those which are brought out by reminiscence narration. It is splendid, and you may be sure I like it first rate, not altogether because I am involved in it myself, but because it is a real analysis that shows a lot of work, thought, and figuring.”

Thane Miller Jones, author of “N. Brown,” in *The Saturday Evening Post* for August 18th, writes: “I failed to receive the July number of *The Student-Writer*. Will you kindly send it, as I want to follow particularly your article on Keeler’s plot methods.”

William MacLeod Raine, whose “The Yukon Trail” recently headed *The Bookman’s* list of “best sellers” in New York City, commented: “I was much interested in your ‘Web-Work’ plot analysis, particularly in Keeler’s suggestion that it is essential to devise a number of early crossings with the thread representing the viewpoint character, that the author may have material for weaving a story.”

Marjorie Lee, through her department in *The Wellspring* for August 11th, gives this advice to aspiring writers: “I may publicly recommend—without in the least encouraging your secret conviction that you are capable of rivaling both Hawthorne and O. Henry—the reading of books upon short-story writing. They all help, if you don’t take their advice with too great docility. . . . At the risk of being rebuked by the editor for free advertising, I am going to tell you of a sensible little monthly called *The Student-Writer*, published at Denver, Colorado, and costing only fifty cents a year. A high-school boy whom I know discovered it, and now he regularly lends me his copy.”

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